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Lesson No. 17, How to Make Ideas Clear

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EFFECTIVE PUBLIC SPEAKING

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NORTH AMERICAN INSTITUTE
CHICAGO

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LESSON No. 17

One of a Series of Lessons in

EFFECTIVE PUBLIC SPEAKING

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HOW TO MAKE IDEAS CLEAR

From time to time in our preceding lessons, it has been said that clearness is a quality of both written and oral composition which must be secured, and too much emphasis cannot be put upon this point. It is obvious that a bit of composition, whether spoken or written, which is ambiguous or vague or indefinite cannot possibly be effective. The one quality of style which must be obtained is that of clearness. The rule is not that we *may* be understood, but that we *must* be understood. And it will be worth while to recall again that which has been said in our previous lessons, that clearness is not an absolute but a relative quality. It must be borne in mind that that which is clear to the speaker—that which seems absolutely, unmistakably clear—may not be at all clear to the hearer. Whately, in his discussion of

rhetoric, tells of an English bishop who gave the following advice to young men about to enter the ministry, "Preach as you would preach to your chambermaids." The implication is clear: simplicity, brevity, exactness, preciseness of statement are qualities requisite if all are to grasp equally the meaning of the spoken word.

The first consideration that needs attention in this connection is one which has to do with the speaker's own mind. The secret of clear expression is clear thinking. One cannot think except in symbols of language and therefore if thinking is clear, logical, definite, and exact, it stands to reason that the vocal expression of such thinking will possess the same qualities. This, then—disciplining the brain so that it shall develop ever and ever clearer thinking—is the most important training that is to be followed and it is one that will have to be followed all the time.

It will be seen that if this quality of clearness is to be present in spoken expression, which is so much the creation of the moment, there must be much time spent in

the most vigorous and exacting discipline in all one's mental processes, and especially in particular modes of training,—such as writing, with frequent revision; continual watchfulness of one's conversation; and the study and analysis of speeches and orations by the world's greatest thinkers and speakers.

At this point more extended consideration must be given to matters suggested before, namely, the two offices of words: which are, first, to name an idea, and, second, to suggest an idea. In the choice of words, then, to express our thoughts one must first be sure that the word chosen truly names the idea he has in mind. The examples following illustrate this point:

"From my boyish days I had always felt a great perplexity on one point in Macbeth."—*Thomas De Quincey.*

Suppose "boyhood" had been used instead of "boyish," and "confusion" instead of "perplexity," what difference?

A speaker recently spoke of "girdling up his loins," when he should have used the word "girding."

In conversation one said, "I am impelled to the belief," when the sense of the conversation showed that he should have used the words, "compelled to believe."

In this matter of choosing words to express our ideas, it will have to be borne in mind that one is compelled to observe what is known as good use. Words and forms of language stand for exact ideas and that for which they stand is pretty largely decided by, first, the manner in which they have come into the language, and, second, by the manner in which the best writers and speakers use them. He who would use the language most effectively must know just exactly how the best writers and speakers are using words and how they put those words into composition; in other words, he must know what good use—the best use of his day—is.

When one has decided that his words are acceptable from the standpoint of naming the idea, he must inquire whether they suggest the exact shade of meaning to his audience which he has in mind. Greater difficulties will be met with in this direc-

tion than any other in all probability. Frequently one has had the experience of a heated argument with a friend and after a season he finally said, "Well if that is what you mean, I agree with you." The waste of time and the heated argument might have been avoided if in the beginning certain expressions which had been used had been clear to both parties. Either the expressions used did not name the idea understood by both or did not suggest an idea understood by both. In a language in which a word may be used to name entirely different things, such as the word "bow," meaning an instrument that flies an arrow, or an act of good breeding when one meets a superior, or a part of a boat, it is readily seen that a careless choice of words would easily lead to great confusion. When also the same word may be used in various suggested meanings, there is added reason for care in the choice of one's words.

Now, what is said in regard to the choice of words singly, is all the more to be observed when one is putting words into composition. The phrase, the clause, the en-

tire sentence also name ideas and suggest other ideas, so if clearness is to be secured in composition, care must be exercised that not only the right word has been chosen, but that these words as they appear together in the phrase or clause or the sentence carry the speaker's true meaning to his audience.

In this connection one must consider a point with which a writer is not so much concerned. For his understanding of what the speaker says the hearer depends not only upon the choice of word, but also upon the vocal form with which the words are uttered. Since the voice is capable of creating a multitude of qualities, the great importance of the correct vocal form aside from the choice of word must be impressed upon us.

It is in order now to take up some suggestions of ways and means for acquiring clearness of thinking, and through clearness of thinking, clearness of statement. In the choice of words the law of clearness demands that choice shall fix upon the word that is exact, accurate, precise, concrete,

particular, simple, and generally literal rather than figurative.

Study the difference in meaning of the following words:

Vegetable and cabbage.

Building material, and scantling, lath, plaster.

Criminal and thief, burglar, murderer, homicide.

Educational institution and college, university.

There may be times when a general term is preferable to the particular, and when the figurative term may be preferable to the literal. The nature of the thought and the purpose of the speech and the occasion and the type of the audience will be considerations which will influence always this matter of a choice of words. It will always be wise to inquire whether a given word possesses more than one meaning or is used in more than one type of suggestion. What is true of the choice of a word is also true in the composition of a phrase, a clause, or a sentence. For the most part, these three larger units must answer the

same demands of exactness, accuracy, preciseness, simplicity, concreteness, and particularity.

Just here the student may well bear in mind the necessity of adapting his statement of ideas to his audience. Bear in mind again what was said in the discussion as to the limitations of an audience, and it will be seen at once that clearness, equally as well as force, is a relative quality. A given sentence may be very clear to a well educated audience accustomed to careful thinking, but the same sentence may be utterly lacking in clearness to an audience less educated and less given to thinking. There is a very common expression which fits this idea; you have heard it said, "Don't shoot over the heads of your audience." This is the very essence of wisdom in the matters now under consideration.

Clearness is also largely secured, or marred, through the kind of sentence structure used. There are three types of sentences, the simple sentence, the complex sentence, and the compound sentence. It will be necessary to remember again that

clearness of sentence structure is dependent upon clearness of thinking. Whether a simple sentence is to be used, or one that is complex, or one that is compound, is dependent upon the nature of the thought, and one must instinctively recognize which one of the three forms will properly or most effectively convey the idea.

Illustrations of Kinds of Sentences:

We traveled in Europe for six months. (Simple sentence.)

We traveled here and there in Europe for six months, not caring where we went. (Complex sentence.)

We traveled for six months in Europe and were well repaid for the time and money spent. (Compound.)

We traveled here and there in Europe for six months, not caring where we went, but we finally grew tired of this aimless wandering. (Compound-complex.)

Particular care must be taken to secure the correct arrangement of the parts of a sentence. Note the following:

Sidney was a tall man, with amber colored hair, erect and strong.

I saw him from the window of a car yesterday going down Cottage Grove Avenue.

The secret of wise sentence arrangement is the ability to recognize the relationship of the parts that make up the whole sentence. A simple principle will do much to secure the results desired: Ideas that belong closely together must be placed together in the sentence. What is true of thought units in sentence arrangement, is also true of the arrangement of sentences in the paragraphs, and the arrangement of paragraphs in the entire speech.

There are three qualities of correct thinking which have been put into laws governing composition. The laws of composition which will materially aid in securing clearness are those of unity, coherence, sequence, and proportion. The law of unity demands that one thing only shall be told at a time. Do not depart from your subject in the whole speech or in any division of the speech.

The law of coherence demands that material shall cohere, that is, hang together, "United we stand; divided we

fall." Obtaining coherence is largely a matter of using proper connectives,—single word connectives, or phrase connectives, or perhaps occasionally an entire sentence connective.

The law of sequence demands that thoughts shall follow in their proper order; in other words, "Do not put the cart before the horse."

The law of proportion demands that there shall not be given more attention to any one part or division of the discussion than properly belongs to it. What amount of space or material shall be given to any part of a subject is again a relative and not an absolute question. The purpose of the speech, the occasion, the limitations of the audience will all affect this matter of proportion.

It will hardly be necessary to do more than remind the student that clearness is very dependent upon correct grammatical relations.

There remains one further point to be taken up here. Frequently clearness is obtained through restatement or repetition

of the idea. The law is that the idea must grow, develop, unfold as repetition or restatement is carried out. Mere repetition or restatement in exactly the same manner would not make for greater clearness.

Thus far practically all that has been said has to do with the form and manner of statement. In closing, the most important principle relating to this matter of clearness needs to be spoken of. It will be remembered that the statement was once made that thought or action or knowledge outside of the experience of the hearer cannot be readily grasped. If then this thought or action or knowledge now unknown can be shown to be similar to some thought or action or knowledge which the hearer has experienced, it will be seen that this method will greatly make for clearness. The following illustrations point the principle:

"You might as well expect a green vine to flourish in a dark cellar, as to expect honesty to exist under the shadow of those upas trees."

"In one hour, under the blow of a single bereavement, joy lay without a pulse, without a gleam or breath."

"A sorrow came that swept through the land as huge storms sweep through the forest and the field."

"The government stood like a lone island in a sea full of storms, and every tide a wave seemed eager to devour it."

EXERCISES.

These exercises are provided as a means of testing the student's knowledge of the subject and for training through actual practice. Exercises are not to be sent to the School.

1. In a single paragraph set forth the meaning of the following terms. Be sure to test your work after it is completed to ascertain if the idea is expressed exactly, precisely, and if the correct relationship is set forth.

a—The Initiative and Referendum.

b—Balance of Power.

c—Militarism.

d—The Coward Deserves Contempt.

e—Industrial Slavery.

2. Re-write the following in such a manner as to secure thoroughgoing clearness:

a—I know of a firm dealing with European countries in which no one understands foreign languages; so that they are obliged to send them out to a woman who translates them for twenty-five cents a letter.

b—It was one of those little states which composed the empire controlled by insignificant princes.

c—He began to look on everyone who approached him with the belief that he was going to do something to him.

"To him who does everything in its proper Time his days are worth three."

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